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STATINTL

ARMS DEALING

Breakdown of a freelance gun-running operation

LAST TUESDAY in Parliament the Prime Minister deplored the "dangerous practice under which arms are transferred from Governments to private salesmen who have been going all over the world selling arms to trouble-makers." Just 48 hours later, in Bedfordshire, fresh traces appeared of the international arms racket: a Frenchman named Paul Bonte rang the office of a transport firm at Dunstable, and demanded delivery of 100 parachutes stored there.

Paul Bonte is one of three mysterious Frenchmen who, aided by an ex-operative of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, tried earlier this year to parachute £98,000 worth of Communist-made arms into Algeria. Ever since that attempt ended with the arrest in Malta of their aircraft and its crew, it seems that Bonte and his fellow-promoters—who totally escaped the rather cursory publicity over the incident—have been working to rebuild their aerial smuggling system. Judging by certain conversations in Brussels during the last few weeks, and Bonte's sudden demand for the parachutes (which were bought for a drop planned some months ago) they may have been having some success.

Investigation of their first attempt, which failed merely through the hilarious incompetence of some of their employees, reveals not only the surprising ease with which arms can be bought and clandestinely shifted around Europe: but also the fact that some Western and Communist Governments seem curiously powerless in dealing with the situation.

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Captain Pickett: to go in at 500 feet

WHEN AT 7.15 a.m. on February 4 a Lockheed Super-Constellation—with the U.S. registration N 9642Z, but bearing the false Ghanaian letter 9G28—landed at Malta, and was found to be carrying 1,000 rifles, two sub-machine guns and 133,000 rounds of ammunition, it was assumed to be bound for the Congo. After the crew had been fined a total of £240 for offences under the Colonial Navigation Act, the operator of the aircraft, Captain Lucien Pickett, said he would never divulge the destination, because his life had been threatened.

In fact, the arms were to have been parachuted into the foothills of a peak called Cascade de Kefrida, some 55 miles from the small Algerian town of Bougie. An elaborate plan had been laid to deceive air-traffic controllers around the Mediterranean.

The story began on October 11, 1964, when Urban L. Drew, an American, received a phone message at Amsterdam airport saying a man called Bonte wanted him.

The fact that Bonte wanted to talk about gun-running took some time to emerge. The fact that it was to be financed by funds of the O.A.S. (the former French-Algerian terrorist organisation) took even longer. But the 44-year-old "Ben" Drew, a cigar-burning, whisky-sinking legend, in the world of fringe aviation, was a logical man to go to about such a matter.

Drew, with 27 decorations for gallantry, used to be president of Seven Seas airlines, which for the United Nations in Congo. It was a three-million dollar outfit until Drew was caught freighting F4U jet-fighters into Tshombe, and was denounced by Adlai Stevenson in the UN. Seven Seas went bust.

But between 1961, when he left the Congo, and August 1964, when he arrived in Amsterdam, Drew had been do-

ing things even more interesting to Bonte. He had been in Vietnam; officially, he was working for a civil airline, but also involved in aviation operations for the American Central Intelligence Agency. Drew, however, has not been altogether successful with the C.I.A. He fraternised with French agents, in the bizarre belief that he could bring them together with his own bosses. "I was furloughed—that means fired."

Drew said last week: "Obviously I was in Vietnam for the U.S. Government, but the connection between this and the Algerian drop has no correlation." The connection, however, seems to be that Bonte's group were given Drew's name through his Vietnam contacts.

Difficult cargo

Bonte met Drew at the Amsterdam Hilton and discussed a "difficult cargo" in vague terms. They made little progress for a week; but then Bonte brought another Frenchman, Georges Starkmann, to see Drew. Suddenly, the talks became "a 20-hour-a-day operation." Drew is still reticent about exactly what Starkmann said to him which was so convincing—except for the statement: "Starkmann used to be in French Intelligence."

Drew recruited an American called Bob Farquhar to help search for aircraft and crew. After some false starts, they happened on Captain H. Lucien Pickett's Usair, operating out of London. Usair had just run into heavy financial trouble when they "stranded" a party of Jamaicans. On January 26 Farquhar got on the phone to Pickett's Argentinian assistant, Osvaldo Riba: had he any DC 4s?

No, said Riba, but they had a Super-Constellation. Farquhar wanted to know only one thing—the standard gun-runner's question: did the doors open inwards? (Outward-opening doors prevent para-dropping.)

The doors were all right. Next day Bonte appeared at London Airport with Farquhar. Over drinks in the transit bar Bonte gave Riba £350 to secure the deal. It was to drop arms in Algeria, and as soon as the talk ended, Bonte left saying: "Now I have to go to Prague and prepare the shipment."

In principle, this was probably the easiest part of the deal, according to practitioners in East-West trade. It would be based on the Communist countries' lust for hard currency, payment being made simply by setting-up a small import-export company, and having it place suitable deposits (for "machinery") to the account of one of the Czech exporting firms in Switzerland or Luxembourg.

However, the Czechs were not told where the shipment was going, in case their political sympathies with Ben Bella overcame their commercial instinct. They were told the arms were for Ruanda Urundi.

On January 31 Pickett arrived in London to find his office wildly excited over the prospect of a half-million deal. There was, however, a difficulty: their Constellation had a lien on it for handling-charges due to their agents at Gatwick Airport.

Next day, Drew and Farquhar came over to sort things out, and a stormy but festive meeting was held at Churchill's night-club. Pickett, a 41-year-old Floridan out of the same war-hero and Congo-pilot background as Drew, attempted to get the fee for the flight jacked up from the £3,500 offered; but Drew told him that this was merely the first of a series of flights intended to move 1,000 tons of arms from Prague, and if he could get the contract it would be worth half-a-million dollars. The Frenchmen put up £1,300 to release the lien.

The Constellation was flown to Amsterdam where Drew and Farquhar had assembled five rather motley crew-members under Captain Vincent Burger.

Next day Pickett arrived to coordinate the take-off to the tiny airport of Beek, in South Holland, where parachutes were to be loaded and the registration changed: but he found the crew in near-rebellion.

Bonte and Starkmann were there: and the crew, who up to then had thought it was "straight" gun-running from Prague to Leopoldville, did not fancy the idea of a parachute drop at night in the Berber foothills. They wanted bonuses and would only go if Pickett accompanied the flight as navigator. Drew had to give the pilot another 1,000 dollars.

Special code

A Trinidadian student in London had been paid 1,000 dollars to get a Ghanaian registration: a telex message ostensibly authorising the letters 9 G 28 was handed to Pickett, but bad weather delayed take-off. Pickett now radioed a rather unusual message to Prague. Coded LKPRYA, which meant direct contact with the Czech air ministry headquarters: it asked for delay of 24 hours on "request for penetration Red 11/CHEE." It was signed with the non-existent name Trans-African Airways.

Normally, an aircraft would ask its take-off airfield to obtain landing-clearance at Prague airport: clearly Pickett was operating under a special relationship. Next day, February 3, the aircraft reached Beek, where the seats were ripped out, parachutes and cargo-rollers loaded, and the Ghanaian letters painted up. At the last moment, Julius Graber, Pickett's Swiss accountant, went along "because we wanted a heart-to-heart talk about Usair's financial prospects."

The Constellation was four hours late when it crossed the Czech border at checkpoint Cheb into Corridor Red 11—but Pickett's message to the Aviation Ministry worked dramatically well. As the aircraft slid

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onto the snow-covered field at 12.10 a.m. a jeep appeared to escort it to a deserted runway. A convoy materialised and, in exactly 40 minutes, 17 tons of arms were on board.

Only Burger was allowed off: to file a flight-plan for Benina field, Libya. Pickett tipped a 100-dollar bill to the head loader (who bowed), and the aircraft took off immediately. In the snow and 18 per cent. over-loaded, take-off was critical, but laboriously the Constellation clambered to 20,000 feet and headed out along Red 11.

Now the plan for evading the Mediterranean flight-controllers came into action. After passing over Munich, the Constellation skirted Genoa: and informed Genoa flight-control that it was bound for Benina in Libya, but had suffered buffeting over the Alps. Building up the picture of an aircraft in difficulties, Pickett radioed Rome at about 4 a.m. to report No. 3 engine feathered.

The scheme then, when the aircraft got south of Sardinia, was to ask Rome for permission to divert to Palma, instead of going to Benina. Permission granted, the plan was actually to turn towards Bone control-zone, penetrate it by going in at 500 ft. above sea-level to avoid possible radar-detection.

There was an agreed landing on a small cape just inside the Bone control. The Constellation, maintaining 500 ft. and with its doors opened, was then to make a timed run towards the foothills of Cascade de Kefrida, 15 kilometres inland. Several runs would have been

got south of Cagliari the crew found themselves in a hopeless tangle. Engine trouble was now perfectly genuine, and they were so late that they would come over the drop-zone in daylight. Also, there was cloud over the target, making the low-level run through the hills dangerous.

The plane was so jammed with guns that the crew could hardly move about the hold—and they found that they had only enough rope on board to tie one-quarter of the crates to parachutes. Pickett—who had never been seen on the operation—decided to abort the mission.

He advised Rome and Malta controls that he was going on to Benina: then, as he approached Malta, requested permission to land. Pickett had been briefed by Drew and the Frenchmen that he was on an official mission: that the US 7th Fleet were monitoring him, and he could go into Malta at any time. Conceivably, but for Pickett's believing the operation might have remained secret. Certainly he was astounded when the Malta police arrested him.

HOW MUCH, in fact, did the security services of the various nations involved know about the operation? One thing emerges clearly: in the words of a senior Dutch intelligence man, "there was far too little consultation about these matters."

There is no doubt that Dutch security was aware of the purpose of Pickett's flight before it took off. Drew had been under surveillance since he arrived in Amsterdam, because the Dutch had been warned by American intelligence about him.

His sudden activity after his meeting with Starkmann was investigated. (Drew made several attempts to get a Strato-cruiser aircraft from America to do the job.)

Dutch security circles maintain that information was passed to the Americans before the flight took place. So far as Insight's inquiries could ascertain, this information failed to get through to appropriate American agencies.

However, it also seems that comparatively little could have been done to prevent the arms-flight. The Constellation left Holland empty.

It seems that one of the things that delayed the aircraft taking off from Beek, though, was extreme difficulties in getting fuelled-up. Gossip on the airport was that the Dutch Air Security division of the State police had delayed the fuelling. The division's head, however, Commandant E. Gerritsen,

merely smiled blandly when this was put to him.

Dutch intelligence, whose interest is chiefly in preventing unscrupulous operators from using Amsterdam's Schipol airport as a base of operation (this is difficult, because it is one of the major centres for charter-flights) are completely satisfied that the motivation behind the operation was a substantial sum of ex-O.A.S. money. However, they have been able to build up only a shadowy picture of Paul Bonte and Georges Starkmann, the two Frenchmen chiefly involved in the operation.

Bonte seems to have been a fixer and interpreter, while Starkmann was the cashier. Altogether, Starkmann paid 61,000 dollars over to Drew to mount the Algiers operation.

Shadowy figure

There was another Frenchman who appeared from time to time named Pierre: he, however, remains completely shadowy. The Dutch are puzzled by the fact that the French seem able to throw comparatively little light on the matter. Insight, however, managed to locate Starkmann and Bonte. The police in Roubaix, where Bonte's family are in business—and where he is known as "an eccentric"—say they have heard nothing of the matter.

Last week, Bonte was traced to Nieuport in Belgium, where at first he denied all knowledge of the matter, except that he had met Drew, Pickett and the others. Faced with the positive evidence of his involvement, he said: "You seem to know all about it. Why do you ask me?" and refused to comment. Starkmann, traced to an address in Rue Monceau, Paris, said he was "fed up with the whole affair," and also would make no admission beyond the fact that he also knew Drew and Pickett.

They did admit, however, that they had "heard of", the Algerian operation. Bonte went so far as to say that there was "definitely no similar operation planned for the future."

Starkmann, however, has been

staying in Brussels recently, and conversations have been proved in which he expressed interest in setting up a similar operation. Since January, the Ben Bella Government, which was presumably meant to be harmed by dropping arms to the rebellious elements, has fallen: however, Dutch security men believe that the organisers of the drop were not activated by political considerations: they were trying simply to set up an arms trade with guns obtained in Czechoslovakia and transported to any customers.

IN THIS context, the question arises of the group's activities in England. Just after the abortive February deal, Bonte, Starkmann and the third Frenchman, Pierre, arrived in London. Pierre carried a briefcase full of dollars, and they held a series of meetings (which went on into April) in some of London's best hotels, including the Hilton and the Grosvenor House.

But although the Frenchmen talked in terms of big money—\$80,000 to set up the first flight and a \$2 million deal in the long term, they could get no takers. "I realised they were up to something when they asked for aircraft with doors opening inwards," said Mike Keegan, of Keegan Aviation.

Pickett had nevertheless bought equipment for the new drop. His agents in the deal paid £1,200 for 100 unused, expired white nylon parachutes. An invoice dated February 10 requires that they be delivered to Pickett at Schipol, but by February 13 they were back in Britain—in storage at Autair of Luton.

When Autair began to ask questions, the parachutes were moved to the equally innocent Williams Transport at Dunstable. It was there that Bonte tried to recover them on Thursday claiming they belonged to him. In view of his past activities, the question inevitably arises as to whether the plan, originally mooted last autumn, to take 1,000 tons of arms out of Prague is still a workable proposition.



Parachutes at Dunstable, convertible for arms-drops

necessary for the crew to get the cargo out: the aircraft was then to turn north and make for Palma, empty.

Palma was selected because it was reckoned one of the "less inquisitive" airports around the Mediterranean. The story that the Constellation had been slowed-up crossing from Cagliari by engine-trouble was more likely to go down there.

But by the time the aircraft